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ABSTRACT

Communication as a discipline is studied in varied contexts: interpersonal, group, organizational, mediated, and public communication. To make clear to students the commonness and not the differences among the contexts, the hybrid basic course should not be taught in separate units as if group communication were a different species from interpersonal, mediated, organizational, or public speaking. Two primary decisions for integrating the basic communication course concern pedagogy and content. For example, using social construction theory as the foundation theory, students could discuss, in small groups, the ways they influence others' behavior, thoughts, and self-esteem--considering the role of communication in this process. They then could produce a paper and a speech. This approach integrates interpersonal communication, group discussion, and public speaking. Using systems theory, students could enter into a group discussion of the role of communication in the negotiation and interpretation of rules, feedback, and goals. Regarding content decisions, focus should be on the communication interaction rather than the context, per se. Social construction theory can be used to teach the foundational concepts, applying the same principles to interpersonal, small group, public, organizational, and mediated communication interactions. Systems theory can also be used for analyzing various communication interactions. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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# Integrating the contexts of the hybrid basic course: Using systems and social construction theory

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Abstract

This paper proposes a content and pedagogical model of integrating the contexts (i.e. interpersonal, small group, public speaking, organizational and mediated) of the hybrid basic course by suing a theory as the foundation of the entire course. The paper offers examples using social construction and systems theories.

**Integrating the contexts of the hybrid basic course:**

**Using systems and social construction theory**

## Introduction

There are two issues which must be addressed here: 1) why to integrate the hybrid basic course and 2) how to integrate the hybrid basic course. I will begin by articulating my reasons for integrating the contexts (interpersonal, group, organizational, mediated and public communication) of the hybrid basic course. Then, I will discuss two primary choices to be made in integrating the basic course.

## Why integrate?

Many academics both inside and outside of the communication discipline have lamented/scorned the seemingly fractured nature of the discipline we call communication. Efforts have been made by various people over the years to unite our discipline around a common theme (note NCA's approach to conferences) or a common theory (we create and/or adopt very broad theories for this purpose). These attempts are laudable and have had varied degrees of success. However, the accusations remain. How can we call ourselves a discipline when we

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encompass aspects of sociology, psychology, social psychology, broadcasting, English, business etc. On top of this, our scholars use methods as diverse as rhetorical criticism, ethnography, and laboratory experiments. This is not a discipline, it is a hodgepodge of borrowings from other, more rigorous disciplines! If academics cannot find a common thread, imagine how our freshman feel coming into a class where the expectation is to improve their speaking skills and they are hit with psychology, business, rhetoric and sociology. The fragmentation of our hybrid basic course adds support to the criticisms of the discipline. Therefore, I posit that for the sake of our students (who are confused and baffled by these different topics in one semester) and for the sake of our standing as <u>one</u> academic discipline, we need to be able to find and show the common threads (which really are there) in what we do. We study communication. We simply study it in varied contexts, i.e., interpersonal, small group, public, organizational, and mediated communication. It is time we made that clear to ourselves and our students by emphasizing the commonness and not the differences between the contexts. We can start to accomplish this by not teaching the hybrid basic course in separate units as if group communication were a different species from interpersonal,

mediated, organizational, and/or public speaking.

Given this end, I propose several ways to teach the basic course as a course in communication. Instructors may choose which contexts are most meaningful for them to cover given the time and objectives of their course. Most importantly, however, is to focus on improving students' communication skills and knowledge in ways that transcend contexts.

## How to integrate

Two primary decisions need to be made to integrate the basic course. The first concerns pedagogical decisions (methods used to teach); the second concerns content decisions (material to teach) . Obviously, one cannot be adequately considered without taking the other into consideration, but for our purposes we will start with pedagogical decisions.

### Pedagogical decisions

One of the keys to integrating the basic course is to integrate the communication contexts used within the basic course. If students only give speeches during the "public speaking unit" and only work in groups while studying the "group communication unit" or chapters, they naturally assume these are different contexts which should not or maybe even cannot be mixed. However, if you use small groups to teach

public, interpersonal, mediated or organizational communication, then the students begin to see some connections or, even better, don't see any strong dividers between the contexts. Likewise, if the students give speeches about mediated, interpersonal, organizational or small group communication, they begin to see that communication processes (i.e., language, nonverbal, system elements, social construction) are the common thread in all contexts.

For example, using social construction theory as the foundational theory, I have students discuss, in small groups, the ways they influence others' behaviors, thoughts, and self-esteem. They also have to consider the role of communication in this process. They produce a paper and a speech. The speech is delivered by one individual but is based on the decisions and examples produced in the group. This approach integrates interpersonal communication (what they tend to talk about), group discussion (the context they are talking within), and public speaking (what they produce to communicate the group's ideas to the rest of the class). With this particular question, though, some groups have chosen to discuss how speeches have influenced others, how nonverbal communication influences others, how small group discussions influence others, etc.

They do a similar activity with the media, answering the question: Does the media influence our social construction of reality? If so, how? If not, why not? Again, they work in groups, but this time they produce a group presentation (making different decisions to adapt to the audience and the occasion) to communicate their ideas to the class.

Because they are required to analyze the speeches and the group discussions, they begin to see the similarities and the differences between these communication contexts. They also learn how to analyze their own and others communications within various contexts.

A second example, using systems theory might include a group discussion of the role of communication in the negotiation and interpretation of rules, feedback and goals, including how conflict about any of these is/can be dealt with. The group produces a paper analyzing real (from their own experiences or the media) or created examples. They also produce a skit of an interpersonal conflict, how it tends to go and how it could be dealt with more effectively. In this way, they practice different communication modes while studying them.

Content decisions

The content of the hybrid basic communication course

generally consists of some mix of the following topics: public speaking, interpersonal communication, organizational communication (i.e. interviewing), small group communication, and mediated communication. Given this wide array of contexts, how can we possibly integrate them all? By remembering that they are contexts in which communication interactions occur. We need to focus on the communication interaction rather than the context, per se. Most hybrid textbooks attempt to do this in their opening chapters . They cover material on verbal communication and language, nonverbal communication, perception and self, and listening. These aspects of communication cut across all contexts. Unfortunately, too many of us teach these as if they were all interpersonal communication or public communication aspects and then we leave this information behind to go on and cover the other units of the course. This segregation occurs in many of our textbooks as well (for examples see textbooks by Verderber, 1993 and Adler and Rodman, 1994). The opening chapters lay a foundation for the rest of the text. But, the foundational concepts are never directly integrated into the various areas. (Although some text books such as the 1997 Julia Wood text, do integrate these concepts throughout).

How can we overcome this problem? One way is to remind

yourself and your students as you teach the opening chapters that they apply in all contexts. Then remind them again as you teach the contexts. However, this seems somewhat cumbersome and artificial. It adds in the concepts rather than actually integrating the contexts.

A second method is to focus on an overarching concept or theory which can encompass all of the communication concepts and contexts. The focus on this theory naturally integrates all the contexts. For instance, social construction theory can be used to teach the foundational concepts but, more importantly, it applies the same principles to interpersonal, small group, public, organizational and mediated communication interactions. Therefore, students tend to view each of these interactions as communication being socially constructed within a given context, not as a completely different discipline altogether.

Social construction theory is not the only theory which lends itself well to this particular method. Systems theory, considering the interdependence of the system, nonsummativity, feedback, inputs and outputs also can be used for analyzing various communication interactions. The centralized focus on a theory integrates the communication contexts in ways which allow students to transfer learning about nonverbal communication (or

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listening, feedback, language use) in one context to new contexts.

Students view all interactions as systems or socially constructed realities and learn to apply one set of concepts to analyze and make decisions regarding the communication behavior within the various systems or social constructions.

Undoubtedly, other theories can also be adapted to this centralized, integrated focus on teaching communication. The only requirement is that the theory be broad enough to allow it to work equally well in many contexts and situations and to aid in students' transfer of learning. The theory also need to be accessible to beginning students.

Social construction theory. For instance, social construction theory can be used very well to talk about meanings of nonverbal communication and the arbitrary nature of language. The theory also encourages you to discuss perceptions, cultural diversity, and self-esteem. These lead naturally to topics about how perceptions and socially constructed meanings are played out within the various contexts. So, students see the same ideas/concepts at work and understand that the context affects those processes. They do not see each context as being composed of different processes altogether.

In order to use the theory as a pedagogical tool, the

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instructor needs to make it comprehendible to students in the basic course. This is not the time to teach subtle nuances and distinctions within a particular theoretical framework. Since I am primarily interested in social construction as it affects the communication interactions common for students, I reduce the theory to the following major and minor premises (the following premises were derived from Berger and Luckman, 1966; Dixson, 1995; Duck and Pond, 1989; Gergen, 1985; Littlejohn, 1992; Parrish-Sprowl, 1993):

1. Our access to the the world is through our interpretations of our experiences (everyone sees things differently).

2. Our interpretations of our experiences are biased by past experience (If we have bad luck with Chevys, we interpret Chevys as a poor choice for a new car).

3. Our past experience or training includes our language, our culture and our family of origin, among other things.

If they accept these statements, they should accept their logical conclusion:

*Therefore, 4. Our access to the world is biased by our language, our culture and our family background.*

This is one of the major tenets of social construction. To carry things a bit further:

1. Because we view the world in certain ways, we act as if this "reality" is true (we sometimes forget there are other interpretations, plus we have little choice since we have to act on what we "know.").

2. Acting as if this reality were true can "make" it true (self-fulfilling prophecy).

This leads to a second major tenet of social construction:

*3. Our behavior (including and especially talk) maintains what we have been taught through past experience, modifies the world to fit our reality, and creates a world consistent with our reality.*

The logic involved in reaching the first major tenet depends on a discussion of the transactional model of communication, the processes of perception, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the formation of self-concept. The validity of this logic is improved with discussions of cultural, gender and familial differences leading to differences in beliefs, behavior and expectations.

The logic in the second tenet involves the discussion of self-fulfilling prophecies, perceptual and attributional biases, and logical fallacies as well as some conversation about how cultural traditions and beliefs are maintained, changed and created.

So, with an indepth exploration of two major tenets of social construction, students gain a solid understanding of communication and how it functions to form their self-concepts and their reality. Just as importantly, they should be able to have a more intimate understanding of the very real differences that exist between people of different cultures and subcultures. When they can "see" why such differences exist, students can examine the possibilities that while other cultures/subcultures are different, different does not equal "bad" or "wrong."

After this foundation in social construction and communication, the class can then explore how realities, once formed, become shared realities and/or modified realities within the contexts of interpersonal relationships, group experiences, organizations and public speaking addresses. They can also investigate how the mediate influences our reality.

Appendix A includes a set of activities designed to help students "discover" the premises of social construction theory by exploring many contexts.

Systems theory. Likewise, systems theory carries the same kind of broad perspective. With systems theory however the focus would be on the primary processes (stability, equifinality, nonsummativity, and change) and elements (interdependent



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components, inputs/outputs, boundaries/hierarchies, rules, goals and feedback mechanisms) of the system (see Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bohner, 1995 for an accessible explanation of systems theory as it applies to social systems). This takes an admittedly different slant to the teaching of communication but still allows the instructor to integrate communication processes with communication contexts. The system simply changes from a dyad, to a small group, to an organization or speaker and audience.

After a mini lecture introducing the system elements and processes, students might begin by analyzing the interdependent people within a system, either one they create or an example given to them. An analysis of roles, hierarchy, how roles affect perceptions, audience analysis given the influence of roles and systems on perceptions and, of course, the part that communication plays in all of this forces student to apply concepts from their texts concerning perception, audience analysis, communication competence, self-concept, and communication apprehension. If different groups choose or are assigned different kinds of systems (i.e., dyadic, small group, organizational, public) the ensuing whole class discussion becomes meaningful to a wider array of students and better integrates the

contexts of the basic course.

Each of the six elements and four processes (or seven element if you add in environment) is approached in a similar fashion although he output of each project changes. Some projects are "reported" by sharing in whole class discussions, others by creating skills, doing individual speeches or doing more formal group presentations. This way the contexts of communication are experienced as well as studied.

I also recommend that a short paper (2-4 pp) be required of each group project since the act of writing decision down tends to focus group discussion.

By working through the aspects of systems theory, students begin to see connections between themselves and their environment and can start to consider the complexities of human communication. Appendix B details some activities for teaching the course from a systems' perspective.

## Conclusion

Both of these theories lend themselves to the teaching of communication within a theoretical perspective which allows students to learn processes and how to adapt the processes to various contexts. Whether it be systems, social construction or some other theory used as the foundation of the hybrid basic

course, I urge instructors to integrate the various communication contexts within both their content and the pedagogical tools they choose to use. In this way, students (and possibly other scholars as well) can begin to see the unifying threads in studying communication.

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**Appendix A: Social Construction in the Hybrid Basic Course: A lesson plan.**

**(based on Understanding Human Communication by Adler and Rodman, 1994).**

**TEAM PROJECTS**

Each project requires a written argument including an answer with support from the text and your experience and an oral presentation to the class.

**Papers** should be typed, 3-5 pages long, double spaced. They should address all questions asked for that project and include at least 5 key concepts (underlined). Don't be afraid to use headings. Papers are group graded (everyone in the group gets the same grade).

**Speeches** should be 5-7 minutes long, with notes using extemporaneous delivery style. Each member of the group is required to present once. The speech should reflect the answer in the paper but not attempt to relate the entire paper. Speeches are individually graded.

Each student should come to class on prep days **ready to participate** with note cards prepared to help the group form the arguments and prepare the paper and presentation. On any given day, I may collect and award points for prep notes.

**Project One**

Questions to answer:

Determine what kinds of influences make us what we are and support your answer using your experience and the text. What is the role of communication in this process? (30 pts.)

Hints to help you answer the question: How did you become who you are? Did any person influence you? Did any place influence you? Does the time (1990s) you live in influence you?

Key concepts to consider:

Chapter 2 Perceiving the self: Self-concept, reflected appraisals, significant others, individualistic vs. collectivistic cultures; personality self-fulfilling prophecy

Chapter 13-Types of delivery: know characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of four types of delivery.

Chapter 15 Persuasive speaking: Persuasion, types of propositions, direct vs. indirect persuasion, steps of the motivated sequence, three rules when using evidence (pp. 513-514), deduction (syllogism and enthymeme) vs. induction, sign reasoning, causal reasoning, reasoning by analogy, three C's of credibility



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**Project Two**

Questions to answer:

Does who you are affect your interpretation of events and how you behave (verbal and nonverbal communication)? How so? Explain and support from experience and the text the process or lack thereof which affects our interpretations and behaviors. What is the role of communication in this process? (60 pts.)

Key concepts to consider:

Chapter 1-Functions of communication: Four needs satisfied by communication;

Chapter 2- Presenting the self: perceived self, presenting self, fact, facework, front vs. back region, high vs. low self-monitors, honesty in impression management; Perceiving others: attribution, six common perceptual errors, cultural differences in perception, empathy vs. sympathy, three parts of perception checking;

Chapter 3-Language: language is symbolic, meaning is in people, four ways language shapes attitudes, how language reflects attitudes (power-complementary vs. symmetrical; affiliation and linguistic convergence and divergence; and accepting responsibility for a message) , equivocal language, abstraction ladder, stereotyping, fact-opinion confusion, fact-inference confusion, emotive language, euphemism, equivocation, gender differences, low-context vs. high context cultures, Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, .

Chapter 4-Overcoming challenges to effective listening: effort, message overload, psychological noise, physical noise, faulty assumptions, Informational listening: Seven effective skills for increasing your ability to listen for information.

Chapter 5-Functions of nonverbal communication: repeating, substituting, complementing, accenting, regulating, contradicting (mixed message), Types of nonverbal communication: kinesics, meaning and importance of eye contact, paralanguage, haptics (importance of touch), clothing, proxemics, Hall's four distances, chronemics, territoriality.

**Project Three**

Questions to answer:

Does who you are and how you behave affect how others behave and who they are? Explain and support from experience and the text the process or lack thereof which affects others. What is the role of communication in this process? (50 pts.)

Key concepts to consider:

Chapter 1-Clarifying misconceptions about communication: Communication is...not always good, will not solve all problems, more is not always better

Chapter 4-Critical listening: critical listening, five guidelines for critical listening, seven logical fallacies; Empathic listening: empathic

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listening, styles of empathic responses-advising, judging, analyzing, questioning , supporting, paraphrasing

Chapter 5-Characteristics of nonverbal: nonverbal communication, nonverbal communication. . . is ambiguous, is culture-bound

Chapter 6-Reasons for forming relationships: Seven reasons for forming relationships;

Chapter 7-Managing interpersonal conflict: conflict, five styles of expressing conflict, gender influences, cultural influences, win-lose vs. lose-lose, compromise, and win-win, steps in win-win problem solving;

Chapter 9-Characteristics of groups: group, rules, norms (social, procedural, task), roles (task, social and dysfunctional), three patterns of interaction (networks), gatekeeper, six decision-making methods;

Chapter 11-Analyzing the speaking situation: three components to be analyze, audience types, demographics of audience, attitudes, belief, value, analyzing the occasion, audience expectations;

Chapter 13-Guidelines for delivery: appearance, movement, posture, facial expression, eye contact, volume, rate.

**Project Four**

Questions to answer:

Define shared reality. How is a reality co-constructed in a personal relationship? Can we deliberately co-construct a shared reality? If so, how? If not, why not? In small groups? In a public speaking situation? What is the role of communication in this process? How do we co-construct conflict? peace? (75 pts.)

Key concepts to consider:

Notes from instructor on shared reality and co-construction;

Chapter 1-Communication defined: communication as process; functions of communication: see Project Four, Modeling communication: transactional model, Clarifying misconceptions about communication: see Project Three concepts

Chapter 6-Stages in intimate relationships: Table 6-1 with definitions, Intimacy and distance in interpersonal relationships: need for autonomy, self-disclosure, social penetration model, reasons for self-disclosure, Johari Window model, characteristics of effective self-disclosure, guidelines for appropriate self-disclosure;

Chapter 7-Communication climates in interpersonal relationships: confirming vs. disconfirming messages, table 7-1 disconfirming messages, Table 7-2 Gibb Categories with definitions,

Chapter 9-What is a group?: group, size; Goals of groups and their members: task orientation vs. social orientation, hidden agenda, ,

Chapter 11-Defining purpose: general purpose, vs. specific purpose vs. thesis statement.

**Presentations for projects**

I. Requirements



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A. one 3 x 5 card
B. outline: to be turned in before the speech
C. extemporaneous delivery
D. 5-7 minutes

II. Grading: (Each area is worth 4 pts. except the area of emphasis which is worth 9 pts.)

A. Material: Suitable topic? clear purpose? logical? well supported? authoritative? time limit? effective language choice?
B. Organization: effective? logical? transitions? outline? followed outline? introduction? conclusion?
C. Paralinguistics: Loudness? pitch? emphasis? inflection? articulation? rate?
D. Nonverbal delivery: Poised? facial expression? energy? gestures? movement? eye contact?
E. Effectiveness: convincing?

**Media Presentations**

Group project: Does the media socially construct our reality? Support your position with specific examples. Use the Appendix in your book. Every person must play an active part in the presentation. Use whatever format seems appropriate and effective.

I. Requirements

A. Outline: due before group begins
B. Sources: cited during discussion and handed in
C. 20 minutes

II. Grading (A, B and E are group grades, C and D are individual grades; A-E 10 pts. each)

A. Material: Suitable topic? clear purpose? logical? well supported? authoritative? time limit? effective language choice?
B. Organization: effective? logical? transitions? outline? followed outline? intro? conclusion? attention sustaining? allowed everyone to be involved?
C. Individual contribution: information offered? questions asked? fulfilling positive group roles?
D. Individual delivery: (See C. Paralinguistics and D. Nonverbal delivery under Persuasive Speech)
E. Overall effectiveness: Convincing?

**Appendix B: Systems Theory in the Hybrid Basic Course: A lesson plan.**

**(based on Communication in Our Lives by Julia Wood, 1997).**

Foundational Lecture: Synopsis of the elements and processes of systems theory (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bochner, 1995)

Elements:

1. Interdependent components
2. inputs/outputs
3. boundaries/hierarchies
4. rules
5. goals
6. feedback mechanisms
7. environment

Processes:

1. equifinality
2. nonsummativity
3. stability
4. change

Each project, completed in groups of 4-6, requires a written argument including an answer with support from the text and your experience and an oral presentation (the oral presentations vary in form) to the class.

**Papers** should be typed, 3-5 pages long, double spaced. They should address all questions asked for that project and include at least 5 key concepts (underlined). Don't be afraid to use headings. Papers are group graded (everyone in the group gets the same grade).

**Project One**

Questions to answer:
Think of a real or imagined system (dyadic, small group, large group or organizational in size). For this system, identify the interdependent people within the system. What roles do these people play within the system? How does their role affect their perceptions of themselves? of others in the system? of the entire system? of people outside the system? Choose one person (or subgroup depending on the size of the system) within this system. If you were communicating with him/her, wheat kinds of things should you consider (analyze your audience)? How does communication help and hinder the interdependence of the people in this system? Be prepared to share you answers with the class in a whole class discussion.



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Key Concepts to consider (these are chapters (if underlined) or sections from your textbook):
Influences on perceptions, enhancing communication competence, self, self-concept, communication responsibilities of leadership, communication apprehension, analyzing your audience.

**Project Two**

Questions to answer:
Given the system you created for Project One, discuss the nature of the hierarchies (power, control) f this system. What are the boundaries of this system (how can you tell who is in and who is not in the system)? Are they rigid or diffuse: rigid boundaries do not allow for as much in the way of inputs and outputs and try to control the kind of inputs and outputs which occur. How doe these four factors influence the communication climate of the system? How does the communication climate influence personal relationships within the system? influence the individual (or subgroups) within the system? Be prepared to share the results with the class by electing one or two spokespersons from your group.

Key concepts to consider:
Understanding culture, communication and culture, first foundations of public speaking, Presenting Public speeches, cultural influences on group decision making, character of personal relationships, communication climate, defensive and supportive climates, self-disclosure, Effective Listening, features of small groups.

**Project Three**

Questions to answer:
List at least three rules for this system. List three goals for this system. What feedback mechanisms inform the system about whether it is making progress toward the goals? When conflict occurs in this system how is it dealt with? Is conflict necessarily detrimental to system goals? What rules seem to function to help the system stay organized (coordinate interaction of members)? What rules regulate the boundaries of the system? Are any of the rules problematic for any members of the system? What role does communication play in establishing and negotiating rules and goals and in interpreting feedback? Draw a diagram which shows the interrelated nature of rules, goals and feedback. Create a skit of "typical conflict" management - then show how it could be dealt with more effectively.

Key concepts to consider:
Conflict in relationships, characteristics of personal relationships, decision making methods, organizing group discussion, task groups, understanding and managing conflict in groups, public speaking as enlarged conversation, Verbal Dimension of Communication, Nonverbal Dimension of



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communication.

**Project Four**

Questions to answer:
Systems need both to establish equilibrium (predictability or stability) and to adapt to change. How has the system you are in right now (your project group) established some measure of stability and predictability? How have you adapted to change (i.e., varying assignments, members not present, member "not being themselves" etc.)? What is/was the role of communication in both the se processes? In what ways could you (individually and as a group) use communication more effectively? Prepare a short speech on either how you group used communication to create stability or to adapt to change.

Key concepts to consider:
Guidelines for creating and sustaining healthy climates, communication in small groups, evolutionary course of personal relationships.

**Project Five**

Questions to answer:
Within a system we can become more than a group of individuals. What does this mean? What is the role of communication in this process? Apply the concept of equifinality to the "goal" of 1) building a good personal relationship; 2) developing a solid, working group, and 3) having a positive interaction with a larger (12-25) group of people. for each goal, define the key terms and discuss what aspects of communication would need to be considered. Prepare a group presentation about your results including a conclusion of the communication aspects in common between the three.

Key concepts to consider:
Challenges in personal relationships, rise of groups and teams, what are small groups, potential limitations and strengths of small groups.

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